

Oxford Health
NHS Foundation Trust

Post COVID-19 Patient information pack

Slightly adapted for Armagh Dungannon area patients with thanks to OXFORDSHIRE health trust. Original available at <https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/leaflets/>

Life after COVID-19

Recovery from COVID-19 may take time. The length of time needed will vary from person to person.

It's important not to compare yourself to others. Ongoing symptoms could last for several months after you contract COVID-19 and this can be perfectly normal.

Post-COVID-19 effects could include:

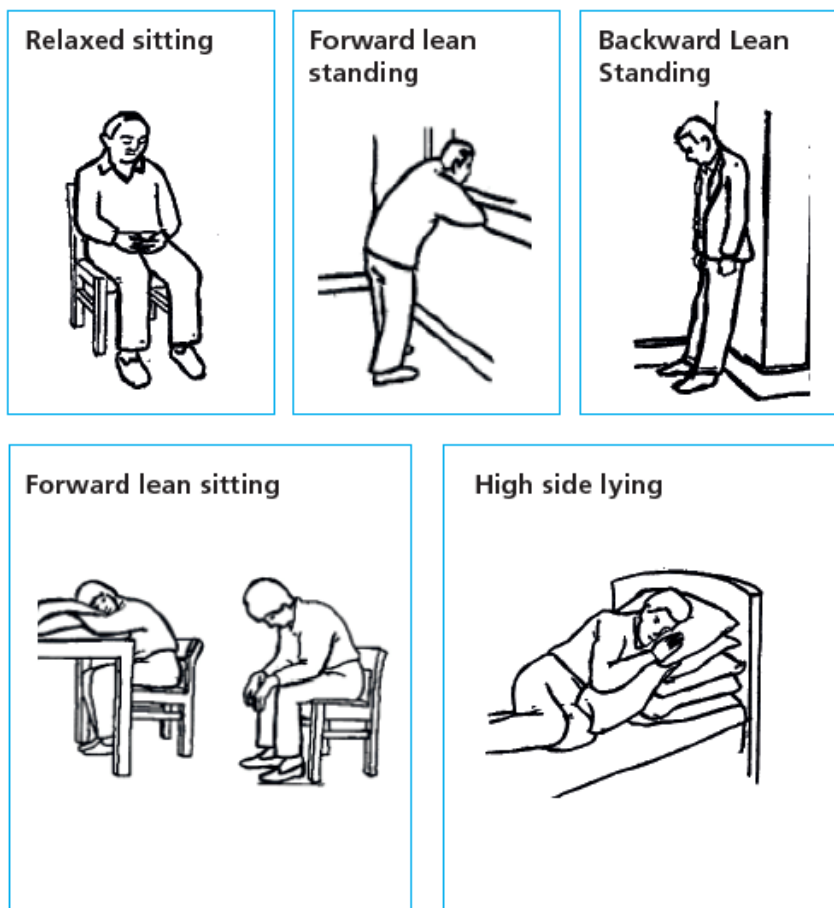
- Muscle weakness and joint stiffness
- Extreme tiredness (fatigue) and a lack of energy
- A persistent cough
- Loss of appetite, weight loss, swallowing difficulties

- Sleep problems and nightmares/flashbacks particularly if you have been in an intensive care unit
- Memory problems – for example, not being able to remember some events, think clearly and being forgetful
- Changes in your mood, or anxiety or depression

Positions to ease breathlessness

Following COVID-19 you may find you have continued breathlessness. You should monitor this and if it gets worse seek further review from your GP

These positions can help ease your breathlessness and can be used when resting or when mobilising.



Exercises to help manage your breathing

Breathing exercises can help you manage your breathlessness and reduce its impact on your every day activities.

Breathing control

- Take a slow breath in through your nose
- Try to relax your shoulder and neck
- Allow the air to fill up from the bottom of your lungs to the top of your chest
- Breathe gently out through pursed lips (as if you were going to make a candle flicker) to create space for the next breath in

Breathing control while walking

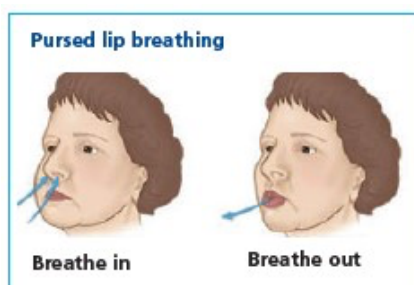
This will help you walk on the flat, climb stairs and negotiate slopes. Try to keep your shoulders and upper chest relaxed and use your breathing control. Time your breathing with your stepping.

- **Breathe in —1 step**
- **Breathe out — 1 or 2 steps**

Keep cool

Make sure you have good air circulation in the room by opening a window or door. Use a wet flannel to cool the area around your nose and mouth. This can help reduce the sensation of breathlessness.

Additional oxygen will not make you feel less breathless!

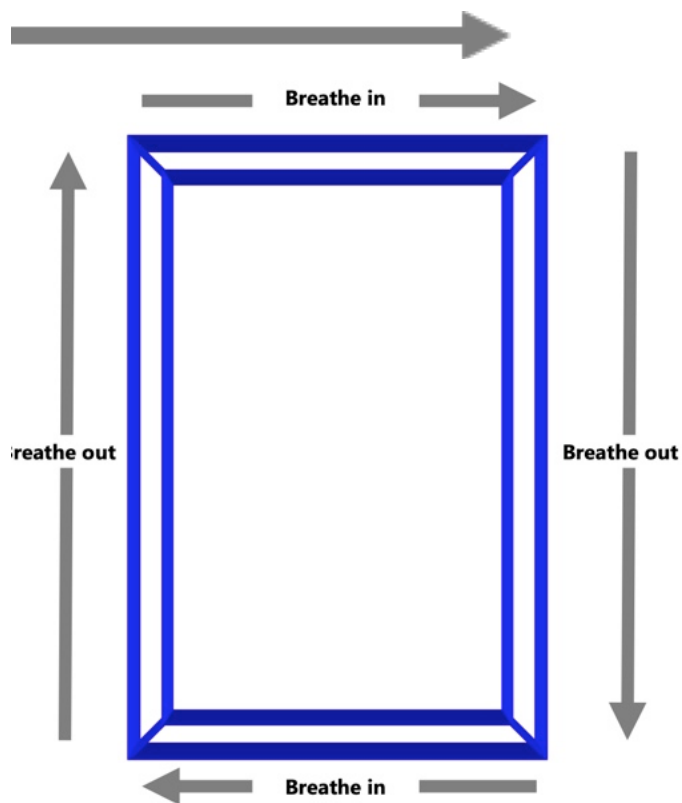


Breathe a rectangle

Find a comfortable position.

Look for a rectangle shape in the room you are in, for example a window, doorframe or TV screen.

Move around the sides of the rectangle with your eyes, breathing in on the short sides and out on the long sides.



Managing your cough

A dry cough is one of the most commonly reported symptoms for COVID-19 however in some cases it may be productive of phlegm (chesty).

Dealing with a dry cough

- Stay well hydrated
- Sipping a soft drink— take small sips, one after the other, avoid taking large sips
- Steam inhalation— pour hot water into a bowl and put your head over the bowl. If comfortable, cover your head and bowl with a towel. Do not use boiling water with small children, to avoid the risk of scolding.
- Drink warm honey and lemon or another warm drink— this can help to soothe the throat
- If you do not have a drink to hand, but need to cough, try swallowing repeatedly. This can work in a similar way to sipping water

Dealing with a productive (wet or chesty) cough

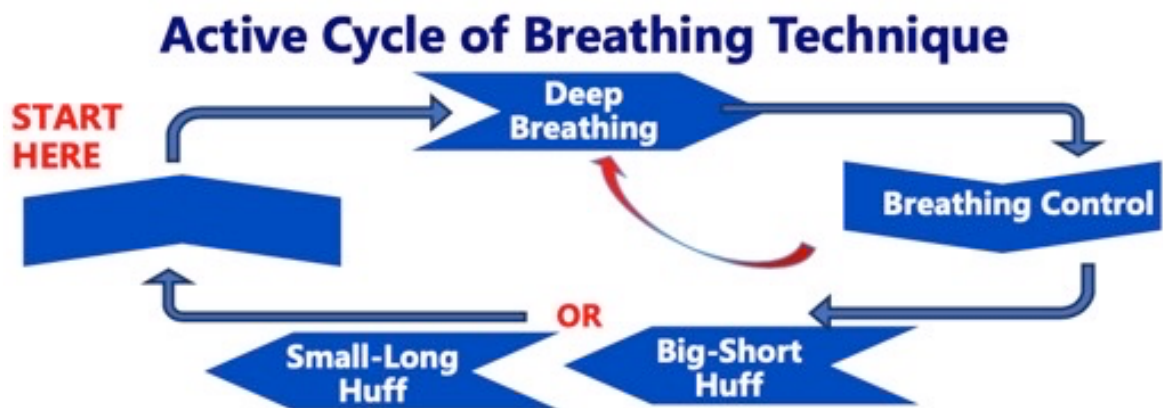
- Keep well hydrated
- Steam inhalation

- Try lying on either side, as flat as you can. This can help drain the phlegm
- Try moving around; this will help to move the phlegm so that you can cough it out

Exercises to help clear your chest

Following COVID-19 you may find that you have a productive cough and phlegm on your chest. These exercises and positions can help clear your chest and may be recommended by your physiotherapist or nurse.

Active Cycle of Breathing Technique (ACBT) exercise consists of three breathing exercises that together help to clear the phlegm off your chest.



Breathing control

- Breathe in and out gently through your nose if possible.
- If you breathe out via your mouth, use 'pursed lips' (see p4)
- Try to make the breaths slower.
- Do as many of these as you can and try this technique between other exercises.

Deep breathing

- Take a slow breath in through your nose if you can.
- Try to breathe out gently, like a sigh.
- Don't exceed 3-5 deep breaths in a row as it may make you feel light-headed or dizzy.
- You may find it helpful to hold your breath for 2-3 seconds before the breath out.

Small-Long Huff

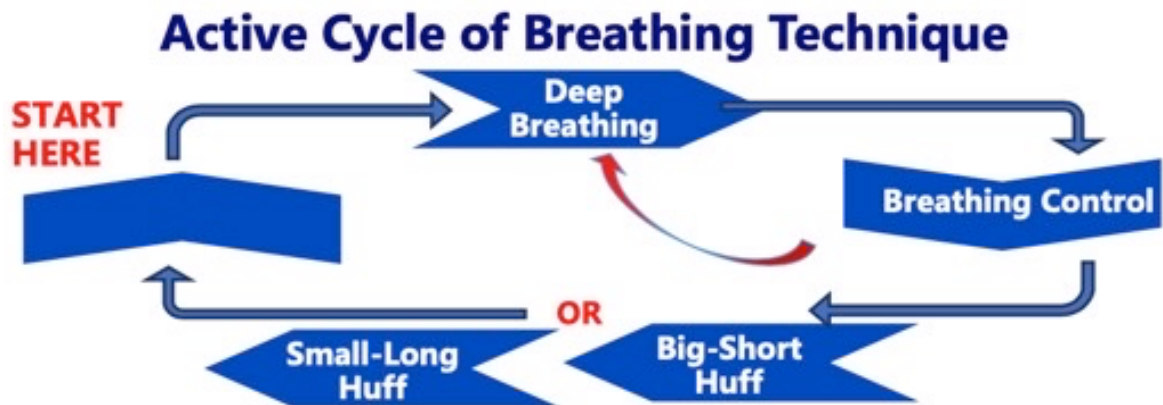
This huff is to move phlegm from lower down in your chest to higher up.

Take a medium breath in and then huff out through an open mouth as though you're trying to mist up a mirror.

OR Big-Short Huff

This huff is to move phlegm from higher up in your lungs. Take a deep breath in and then huff out quickly.

This should clear your phlegm without needing to cough.



If huffing doesn't clear your phlegm, then you may need to cough. Avoid long coughing fits as they can be tiring, give you a sore throat and make you feel breathless.

Clearing your chest should be done regularly. You may only need to do it once or twice a day. If you're producing more phlegm, you may need shorter but more frequent sessions.

Remember to drink plenty of fluids - this will make it easier to cough up the phlegm

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Positions to help keep your chest clear

Use the positions on this page along with the active cycle of breathing techniques (page 7) to help clear your chest.

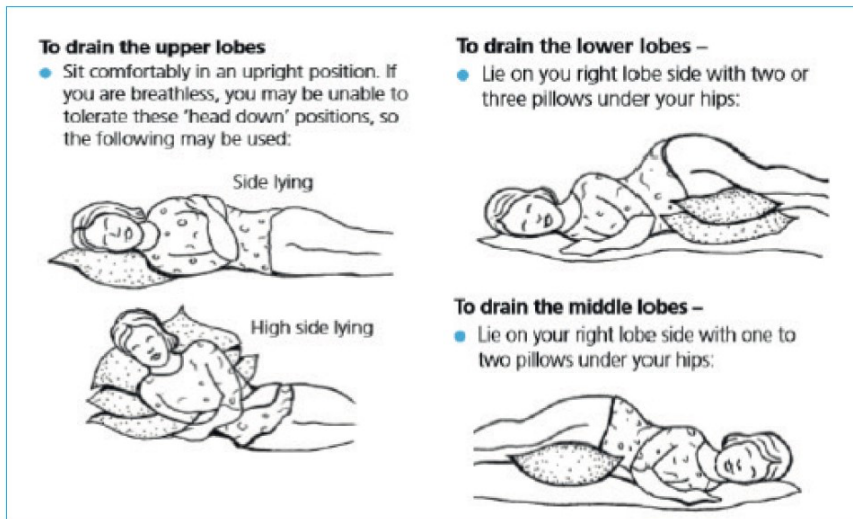
However:

- Don't use immediately before or after a meal
- Stop if you have any side effects
- Choose the position below that you feel would best drain your lungs. You can do this in discussion with a health care professional.

Do not do this if you have:

- Nausea
- Acid reflux
- Become significantly breathless
- Have blood in your phlegm
- Have had a recent chest, spine or rib injury ● Feel wheezy

If you have any of the above, please speak with a health care professional before trying these positions



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Fatigue following COVID-19

COVID-19 is a new coronavirus.

We are on a steep learning curve about how it behaves and guidance is constantly evolving, but we are discovering more as time goes on.

One of the things that we are becoming aware of is that a small proportion of people experience a range of ongoing symptoms following coronavirus, including overwhelming fatigue.

They are finding that they are not able to return to previous levels of energy and health in the weeks following the infection.

Some degree of fatigue or weakness is quite common after a viral infection. This is known as post viral fatigue.

Often it is short-lived and people return to normal after a few weeks, but for some a full return to health can take months rather than weeks.

From our current knowledge of post viral fatigue and other previous similar viral infections such as SARS, there are some general principles around managing fatigue that can help in supporting the natural recovery process.



The initial phase

If you have or have had coronavirus it is likely that you will experience fatigue as a symptom.

This is the body's normal response to dealing with an infection.

For most the infection and initial fatigue will be a mild to moderate with recovery occurring over a week or two.

During this initial phase it is important to:

- **Sleep** – you may find that you need to sleep much more. This is normal during an infection so sleep as much as you feel you need.
- **Rest** – this allows your body to focus on dealing with the infection. In this situation, rest means periods of time during the day doing very little, physically or mentally. Even low-level activity such as TV or reading may need to be paced or minimised, depending on your level of illness.
- **Eat and hydrate** – eat and drink little and often if you can, increase your fluid intake if your appetite is low, sipping water regularly throughout the day.
- **Move** – If you feel well enough, move at regular intervals throughout the day to keep your body and circulation moving. This could be simple stretches either in your bed or chair if you are unable to walk around.
- **Pause your work/education** - allow yourself to fully recover from the initial infection before returning to your previous activity levels.



The recovery phase

When people start to feel better after an infection, it is often tempting to return to previous levels of work, leisure and social activities.

However, if fatigue and other symptoms are continuing it can be important to do this slowly and gently. **Don't try to 'push through' what you feel you can manage easily.**

The most important aspect of managing post infection fatigue is giving yourself time for recuperation, or convalescence as it has been known. This requires a combination of rest, relaxation and gentle activity.

In practice this involves:

- **Activity Management** – balancing periods of low- level gentle activity with periods of rest. You could start with some light activity or tasks followed by longer periods of rest. Mix up the physical and mental activities throughout the day.
- **Setting the limits** – Finding the right balance of activity management is very individual to you and the stage that you are at with your recovery. Once you've worked out what is a suitable level and duration to do an activity try to set the limit before you start something and do not exceed this i.e. unload just the top layer of the dishwasher or check through emails for 5 minutes.
- **Routine** – Try to resume a pattern of sleep, mealtimes and activity. Avoid doing too much on a good day, that then might exacerbate the fatigue and other symptoms. Having a basic routine, that has some flexibility, can be helpful for when you are ready to start increasing. A regular routine can also help you sleep better.
- **Rest** – Your body will continue to need rest to help with healing and recovery. You may find that you do not need to rest for long periods like you did initially, but regular short rests throughout the day will continue to be helpful. Take as much rest as you need.



● **Relaxation/meditation** – adding in approaches such as mindfulness or relaxation/ breathing techniques can help to aid restorative rest. There are some useful resources online.

● **Sleep** – Whilst we encourage resuming a routine for sleep, sleeping for longer can often be an important requirement for ongoing healing following an acute infection. You may find in this phase a short day-time nap, 30 – 45 minutes, not too late in the afternoon is helpful.

pleasurable activity can help both well-being and energy levels so build these into your activity plan. This can be something small, such as chatting to a friend or watching your favourite TV show.

● **Work/education** - It might be advisable to avoid going back too soon to work once the initial viral symptoms of fever or cough have subsided and to give yourself a little time to recover. You may find a phased or gradual return helpful, for example, starting with just mornings every other day and slowly building up over the next few weeks. You may be able to get support from occupational health or a 'fitnote' from your GP.

● **Exercise** – Depending on the stage of your recovery, some exercise may be helpful. This might be some gentle stretches or yoga or a short walk. For people who usually do a lot of exercise, it is important to only do a small fraction of what you would normally do and at a gentle pace. Resume slowly and gradually increase over time as your illness improves.

● **Diet** – Maintaining a healthy diet with regular fluid intake will help to improve your energy levels. **If possible avoid caffeine and alcohol as much as you can.**



● **Mental wellbeing** – Looking after your emotional health is another important factor in managing fatigue. We know that stress and anxiety can drain the energy battery very quickly.



Post infection:

You may be starting to feel better after a few weeks and over time you may feel able to increase your activity gradually.

Resist pushing through the fatigue and maintain some degree of routine, rest and activity.

In most cases people do eventually recover from post-viral fatigue after a period of convalescence, but it can sometimes take many months.

However, if your health is not improving, or if you continue to experience persistent symptoms after a few months that interfere with your capacity to carry out normal everyday activities, it is advisable to speak with your GP.

They can check to find out if there aren't any other causes for the fatigue.

Acknowledgements:

With thanks to:

OMEGA (Oxfordshire ME Group for Action) The ME Association

BACME (British Association for CFS/ME)

The emotional impact

The experience of having COVID-19 can be very frightening. It is very understandable that the experience can have an emotional impact.

Whether you have had mild or more severe symptoms, these are some common difficulties that you may be having:

- Feeling anxious when breathless
- Worries about health or about family or friends getting ill
- Feeling low in mood
- Poor sleep

If you were treated in hospital, you may also experience:

- Unpleasant images from your stay, that might seem to come 'out of the blue'
- Nightmares
- Feelings of panic with any reminders of hospital

What can help?

- Avoid watching too much news or social media if it is making you feel anxious, try limiting yourself to looking at the news once a day

- Speak to family and friends
- Try to do activities that you find enjoyable and relaxing
- Don't be too hard on yourself if there are some things you find harder to do. Remind yourself that recovery takes time
- Focus on what is in your control, like eating well
- If you continue to feel overwhelmed by your symptoms, speak to your GP or contact Lifeline 0808808 8000. **0808 808 8000** <https://www.lifelinehelpline.info>
A range of other supports available are also listed on The Archway Surgery website go to 'patient information' then 'patient information and useful contacts' <https://www.thearchwaysurgery.co.uk/patient-info/useful-contacts/>

Relaxation techniques

Relaxation is an important part of energy conservation.

It can also help you to control your anxiety, improve the quality of your life and reduce pain and discomfort. Below are two relaxation techniques you can use to manage anxiety and help you relax.

Grounding techniques for when you feel anxious

Take a few slow breaths and ask yourself: ● What are five things I can see?
● What are four things I can feel? ● What are three things I can hear? ● What are two things I can smell? ● What is one thing I can taste?

Think of these answers to yourself slowly, one sense at a time spending at least 10 seconds focusing on each sense.

Picture yourself somewhere calm

Think of somewhere relaxing and peaceful. It could be a memory of somewhere you've been or a made up place.

Close your eyes, and think about the details of this place.

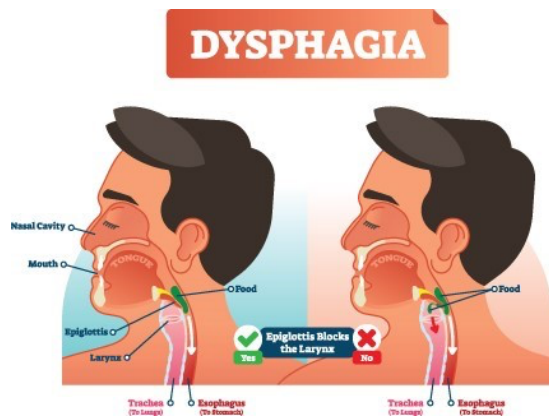
What does it look like:

- What colour and shapes can you see?
- Can you hear any sounds?
- Is it warm or cool?
- What does the ground feel like?

Spend some time imagining each of these.



Managing changes to your swallowing (dysphagia)



Following or during COVID-19 you may experience problems with your swallowing. This can

impact your eating and drinking as well as management of your saliva.

Common Signs of difficulty:

nose or mouth

- Pain on swallowing
- Losing weight unintentionally
- Difficulties managing saliva
- Prolonged mealtimes
- Repeated chest infections
- Choking or coughing during
- Food/drink spilling from the mouth after eating or drinking
- Difficulties with chewing foods or a feeling of something stuck in the throat
- A wet or gurgly voice after eating and drinking

Physical weakness due to loss of muscle mass during illness has been seen in COVID-19 patients and can impact your ability to feed yourself, chew or safely swallow food, drink and saliva. Following COVID-19 you may additionally experience:

- Tiredness during mealtimes and general fatigue
- Changes to taste and sense of smell

These problems may take some time to recover and if not improving Speech and language therapy may help

They may recommend you change the foods you are eating or the consistency of your drinks to support safe eating and drinking.

They can discuss managing excess /not enough saliva with you and your GP.

Problems with swallowing can also be associated with dehydration and malnutrition so it is really important to inform your family/GP so a referral can be made for swallowing assessment.

If the changes to swallowing are significant, you may need to have short/long term supplementary tube feeding to support recovery.

Swallowing difficulties may be persistent if long term respiratory support is needed e.g. oxygen therapy or ventilation.

This may also make you more vulnerable to further chest infections. Other changes to respiratory function post- COVID can include chronic cough.

Things you can try:

- Sit as upright as possible for eating and drinking
- Take your time and focus on eating and drinking e.g. turn off the TV
- Avoid straws or cups with lids unless otherwise advised
- Ensure any dentures fit correctly
- Keep your mouth clean with regular teeth brushing and good oral hygiene

Changes to your voice

As a result of the COVID-19 virus you may experience some changes to the sound of your voice, and to your comfort and effort levels when using it.

These changes are similar to changes you would expect to experience with a cold or 'flu' but are expected to be more intense and longer lasting. We anticipate that these voice problems may take 6 – 8 weeks to gradually resolve.

During the illness you are likely to have been coughing excessively for prolonged periods. This brings your vocal cords forcefully together and can leave them swollen and inflamed.

This makes them less able to vibrate freely so the sound of voice changes. Your voice may sound rough or weak and can be very effortful to produce.

Changes to your breathing as a result of Covid may impact the sound or function of your voice. Intubation can also contribute to changes in voice due to complications such as:

- Oedema (swelling) and ulceration of the vocal cords
- Vocal fold palsy
- Acute and long-term impaired voice quality e.g. weakness, hoarseness, vocal fatigue, reduced pitch and volume control

Things you can try:

- Keep well hydrated. Drink 1 1/2 - 2 litres (4-5 pints) of fluid each day, unless advised otherwise by your GP. Avoid caffeine and alcohol
- Try gentle steaming with hot water (nothing added to it). Breathe in and out gently through your nose or mouth. The steam should not be so hot that it brings on coughing
- Avoid persistent, deliberate throat clearing if you can and, if you can't prevent it, make it as gentle as possible. Taking small sips of cold water can help to suppress the urge to cough
- Chew sugar free gum or suck sugar free sweets/lozenges to promote saliva flow to lubricate the throat and reduce throat clearing. Avoid medicated lozenges and gargles, as these can contain ingredients that may irritate the lining of the throat
- Avoid smoking or vaping
- Talk for short periods at a time. Stop and take a break if your voice feels tired
- Always aim to use your normal voice. Don't worry if all that comes out is a whisper or a croak; just avoid straining to force the voice to sound louder
- Don't choose to whisper; this does not 'save' the voice; it puts the voice box under strain
- Avoid attempting to talk over background noise such as music, television or car engine noise, as this causes you to try to raise the volume, which can be damaging
- If you are experiencing reflux, speak to your GP as this can further irritate the throat

Changes to communication Emerging evidence suggests a proportion of people with COVID-19 also present with changes to communication associated with neurological impairments. You may experience: ● Delirium that may persist

- Dysarthria – changes to the clarity of your speech
- Agitation and confusion
- Impaired consciousness
- Acute cerebrovascular events e.g. stroke or encephalopathy, myopathy/ neuropathy and hypoxia (lack of oxygen to the brain)
- Dysphasia – changes to your ability to find words, form sentences, read or write
- Dyspraxia – changes to how your brain sends messages to your mouth to form sounds or words
- Dysphonia – changes to voice (see above)
- Cognitive-communication disorders e.g. changes to memory or planning
- Speak slowly and with increased effort if your speech is not clear
- Try other methods if speaking is challenging e.g. writing it down, gesture
- Try to maintain a routine to reduce unexpected conversations if needed
- Look after your voice following the advice (page 18)
- Ask for help from your household with remembering information if needed
- If you are experiencing fatigue, try to limit effortful communication. This can be supported by routine, a familiar person who will know your wants/needs and using alternative methods of communication where possible

This advice has been adapted from a publication produced by the British Laryngological Association in May 2020 and a publication produced by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in May 2020.

Smoking and COVID-19

- Smoking increases your risk of infection due harm caused to your immune system and lungs. Smoking is linked with poorer outcomes in COVID-19
- It is never too late to stop
- By stopping, you can see benefits within 24 hours

Southern trust continues to offer help with stopping smoking

<https://southerntrust.hscni.net/health-wellbeing/health-improvement/stop-smoking-services/> Contact them:

- By phone on **07769256756** (Armagh and Dungannon area)
- By completing a referral form online at <https://southerntrust.hscni.net/health-wellbeing/health-improvement/stop-smoking-services/>
- Via the '**Quit With Bella**' app, this can be downloaded on Android, iOS and Alexa. Bella is your personal stop smoking coach that has been trained by expert advisors who have helped thousands of people quit smoking.

Managing your diet post COVID-19

You may find your taste changed during and for a period of time following COVID-19. however it is important to eat and remain well hydrated.

What makes food & drink important?

When our body is fighting an infection it needs more **energy** and more **fluids** to help; so we need to eat and drink more than we usually would if we were well. When our body is recovering from an infection it needs more building blocks (from **protein** foods) to repair, and enough vitamins and minerals to help the process along.

What can you do to make the most of your food & drink?

Continuing to choose foods higher in protein together with gradually getting back to normal activity levels will help to rebuild your strength...

- Aim to have **3** hand sized items from the **Protein** group daily
- Aim to have **3** thumb sized items from the **Dairy** group daily

Protein foods include beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins. Eat more beans and pulses, less red and processed meat.

If you want to gain weight, choose the full fat and full sugar versions



How can you get enough vitamins and minerals?

Aim to have **5*** handfuls from this **fruit and vegetable** group each day. **Eat a rainbow:** Variety is important. Different coloured fruits and vegetables contain their own combination of vitamins, minerals and fibre, so to get the most benefit, try to eat one portion from each colour group. **if this is difficult, you may want to buy a daily multivitamin & mineral supplement; your pharmacies can advise you.*



If you need more help and support your GP can refer you to the Community Dietitian

Diet and shopping support

There is some information on delivery services at <https://www.armaghbanbridgecraigavon.gov.uk/covid19-shop-delivery-collection-service/>

- For those who need to shield visit: www.coronavirus-vulnerable-people.service.gov.uk
- Useful nutrition information online: www.bda.uk.com/resource/malnutrition-pathway-covid-19-leaflets.html

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Physical activity advice following COVID-19

Spending time in hospital or being ill at home with COVID-19 can result in a significant reduction in muscle strength, particularly in your legs. This can be for a number of reasons, but mainly due to inactivity.

It's not harmful to get out of breath when doing physical activity, this is a normal response.

When you are doing physical activity, it is ok to feel moderately breathless

Make sure you keep doing these regularly however if you are unsure, contact the prescribing therapist.

Do not overdo it, try to increase your activity levels slowly.

However, if you are too breathless to speak, slow down until your breathing improves. Try not to get so breathless that you have to stop immediately, Remember to pace your activities. You might have been given some exercises to do in hospital or in the community by a physiotherapist.

When you are doing physical activity, it is ok to feel moderately breathless

Make sure you keep doing these regularly however if you are unsure, contact the prescribing therapist.

Do not overdo it, try to increase your activity levels slowly.

0	Not at all
0.5	Very, very slight (just noticeable)
1	Very slight
2	Slight
3	Moderate (able to say 5 words before taking a breath)
4	Somewhat (able to say 2-3 words before taking a breath)
5	Severe
6	
7	Very severe
8	
9	Very, very severe (almost maximal)
10	Maximal



Social life and hobbies

When you've been seriously ill, you may feel differently about things and you may not want to do things you used to enjoy. You may:

- not feel like seeing lots of people at once
- find it difficult to concentrate
- find it hard to follow a TV programme.

Your concentration will get better and your memory will usually improve

What if my symptoms do not improve?

The length of time that it takes to recover from COVID-19 varies from person to person, for some it will be days, others weeks or months.

The more severe your symptoms, the longer it might take for you to return to what is normal for you. If however after 6-8 weeks, you are still experiencing symptoms, please contact your GP for further review.

Post COVID-19 support for patients & families

Asthma UK and **The British Lung Foundation** have set up a support hub to provide information and dedicated support for people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and their family members. This can be accessed at: www.post-covid.org.uk

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